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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1666
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5148
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8743
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6315
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1953
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 4159
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2136
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000930

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SUBJECT: THE ROAD TO MANDALAY: CDA'S DECEMBER 3-4 VISIT

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Classified By: P/E Chief Jennifer Harhigh for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) During a December 3-4 visit to Mandalay, the Charge, accompanied by PAO, P/E Chief and the Embassy's Information Resource Center Director, met with the mayor (a Brigadier General), NLD officials, USG program alumni, and the Indian CG. NLD officials are constantly harassed (security personnel almost certainly listened in on our meeting). NLD officials complained about central NLD leadership, and some called for the new U.S. Administration to engage with the Burmese regime. The U.S. team visited a reference library and a well-known monastic school that receives funds through our small grants program. CDA concluded the visit by drawing record numbers (over 100 attendees) to the Jefferson Center -- the former U.S. Consulate, now our satellite American Center -- for a lively Q&A on the USG transition. End summary.

Mayor Respects the Chain of Command

¶2. (C) During a courtesy call, Mandalay Mayor Brigadier General Phone Zaw Han said his job is challenging but he offered little detail. He said he reports directly to the Prime Minister (PM) (as does the Mayor of Rangoon) and maintains back-and-forth communication with the PM on issues affecting the city. The mayor noted he is, at the same time, subordinate to the regional military commander (Mandalay comes under Central Command, Brigadier General Tin Ngwe.) (Note: We sought a call on the Commander without success End note.) PAO and CDA explained the activities of the Jefferson Center, and invited the Mayor and his staff to visit the reading room and/or attend cultural activities, which have steadily increased since the center's opening in February 2008.

¶3. (C) It was clear throughout the call that the mayor -- 31-years an infantry officer, 4 years a mayor -- respects his chain of command. He offered no details on problems in Mandalay, denied any racial issues in the city, which has

significant Chinese and Indian populations, and refused to speculate on whether the planned 2010 elections would affect his position. He and his wife are avid golfers; he invited the CDA to join him for a round during a future visit.

Mandalay NLD Harassed; Unhappy with CEC Leadership; Suggest POTUS Engagement with Regime

¶4. (C) During a meeting with five NLD party officials and members, CDA asked for an update on the current political situation in Mandalay and solicited the party's advice on future steps, given the regime's planned 2010 elections. The party officials acknowledged the extreme hardships they face conducting party business from private houses and without the benefit of media, communications, or any reasonable way of communicating with their constituency. Party officials told us they are under constant surveillance. As an example, they cited the trials of three party colleagues, during which taped conversations of a March 2006 meeting with U.S. Embassy officials were played in court. (Note: We were tailed from our hotel to the meeting location, and the meeting was almost certainly recorded, likely from an adjacent meeting room. The NLD leaders were aware of the likelihood. End note.)

¶5. (C) When asked about relations between the Mandalay branch and the NLD's Central Executive Committee (CEC), the members said they are not satisfied with current leadership but nonetheless obey orders. They are able to openly discuss issues during quarterly meetings with the CEC. Mandalay NLD leaders acknowledged difficulties with reforming the youth wing of the party, but were unable to offer details on efforts to attract new members.

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¶6. (C) Regarding the 2010 elections, the NLD officials said they have yet to receive formal instructions from the CEC, but they stand by their demands for the release of political prisoners, national reconciliation, and some sort of recognition for the parliament elected in 1990. One NLD official suggested international initiative is needed to break Burma's political impasse. He appealed for the U.S. to have a dialogue with the GOB and Aung San Suu Kyi. One leader proposed that the new U.S. President should negotiate with senior regime leadership.

Indian CG: A Lonely Job

¶7. (C) Indian Consul General for Mandalay Y.P. Singh told CDA duty in Mandalay is quite lonely, given the lack of a diplomatic or international community. He described the difficulties those of Indian descent face in Burma, including the inability to obtain national registration cards even after years in country. He lamented that Chinese immigrants could obtain such cards in a mere three weeks. He mentioned several times the increasing Chinese presence in Mandalay and the close relationship between the GOB and China. (Note: CDA requested a meeting with the Chinese CG, who was unavailable. End note.)

Paung Daw Oo Monastery Thriving

¶8. (C) A visit to the Paung Daw Oo monastery and its leader, U Nayaka, allowed the CDA to see one of Mandalay's most vibrant community centers. With free schooling, health clinic, and vocational training program, Paung Daw Oo is crowded and a beehive of activity. Over 7,000 students attend the monastic school in two shifts, and nearly 1500 monks and students live and work on the monastery's grounds. The monastery's operations are supported by donations from private benefactors and foreign governments, including the British and German. The health clinic, part of the privately-run SUN clinic network, receives U.S. funding

through Population Services International, and the monastery has received Embassy small grants funds for critical thinking and monastic-education teacher-training programs. U Nayaka, an International Visitor Leadership Program alumnus, visited the United States in September on a fundraising trip.

Jefferson Center Ramps up Activities

19. (C) At the Jefferson Center, the Embassy's satellite American Center in Mandalay, the CDA delivered remarks about the U.S. Presidential transition and then engaged in Q&A for 90 minutes with a lively audience of over 100 library members, students, and alumni of various U.S.-sponsored exchange programs. The turnout was the largest for a speaker event at the Center to date. The first half year of the Center's existence was intentionally kept low-key, but starting this past summer, the Center increased library hours, added full-time staff, commenced English classes, and has welcomed several guest speakers. We intend to continue increasing activities at the Jefferson Center, including possible outdoor concerts on the Center's extensive grounds, which are located across the street from the Mayor's office. A bluegrass group sponsored by ECA's Rhythm Road program will be a test case when it visits Burma in early spring 2009.

DINGER